

EXHIBIT O

April 12, 2021

The Honorable Claude M. Hilton
United States District Judge
United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia
401 Courthouse Square
Alexandria, VA 22314

Your Honor,

I write you in regards to the matter of Peter Debbins, who signed a plea agreement to the charge of conspiracy to gather or deliver defense information to aid a foreign government, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 794(a) and (c).

In your judgment I hope you will find it just to sentence Peter Debbins to time served or to some sentence that allows him to work and live with his family in the community—whether supervised release, probation, community service, or some combination thereof. I think it would not only be justifiable, but just to release him for time served with probation and community service.

My relation to Peter is friendship. I am 49 years old, I grew up a Cold War kid and an Army brat, and I previously did federal security compliance for the Department of Homeland Security Citizenship and Immigration Services. I know exactly how security compliance is supposed to work.

I am a victim of the Office of Personnel Management hack, the infamous 2015 data breach that sent all my personal self-disclosures to a foreign power. I feel that betrayal personally.

I have been a victim of a violent crime and several people close to me have been victims of violent crimes so I understand the victim point of view very well.

I was present in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981 and was an eyewitness of the assassination attempt on John Paul II, almost certainly as a result of his efforts to defeat Soviet Communism.

I volunteered with the Cold War Museum in Virginia over a ten-year period, and I have met many Special Operations soldiers and heard their stories at length. I grew up taught to be scared of Russia and all things Russian.

For religious reasons and personal interest, in the last five years (long before I met Peter) I started to learn about Russia, her history, culture, religion, language, and people. This turned out to help me better understand Peter's family background in the Soviet Union,

and the conditions he encountered when he first went to Russia as a teenager.

I was as shocked as everyone else to learn of Peter's arrest. It took me a long time to get over the shock and start to really ask what happened here. What is missing in all of this is a true searching exploration of what happened and why. I can only tell you what I know, and the conclusions I draw from that knowledge.

- At the top of this letter I discuss my friendship with Peter and the results of my observations and conversations with him and people who know him.
- Second, I try to align what I know about Peter to the statutory sentencing requirements in 18 USC 3553.

HOW I KNOW PETER

Peter always told me the same thing: David, you can call me anytime.

My name is David DePerro and I am Peter's friend and fellow parishioner at our Catholic Church in Virginia. We met at a men's accountability group.

I only met Peter in January 2020, but (outside his family) I am probably the person with whom he has spoken the most since his arrest. Peter has called me sometimes several times a week for up to 30 minutes at a time since his arrest.

I set a special ringtone for him and whenever I hear him calling from jail, I answer no matter what. Talking to Peter is always the highlight of my day.

I feel I have a very good sense of his state of mind and his progress since last August, and also in the months before that. Our conversations are direct, heartfelt, and frank.

Peter is one of my best friends, in fact at this point in my life he is my best friend. He is very dear to me and close to my heart. I suffer gravely to think of him in jail. I miss him and want to be able to call him and talk to him and meet and work through problems with him. I must say, he is unique among any of my friends. I need his friendship and his Christian brotherhood.

Peter has a noble character and high ideals. He is a trained warrior but more than that he is a spiritual and sensitive soul. He has great possibilities before him no matter what happens in this case. He embarks on that new life chastened and challenged to do better.

PETER'S FRIENDSHIP REVEALS HIS CHARACTER

Most friends are content to let you remain as you are. Others try to change you and fix you. Peter does neither. His approach is to improve himself and to invite you to do the same and to do it together with him.

Peter was constantly advising me about how to liberate my mind from the captivity of my own harsh self-criticism. And the way to do that was to activate the body and retrain the mind. He has worked very hard at retraining his mind away from self-pity, negative self-image, and other thoughts that were making him miserable and holding him back. It was exciting and energizing for me too.

Through the first half of 2020, Peter was making so much progress, day by day, week by week. He was making breakthroughs in his own mental hygiene. He was sleeping through the night. He was making breakthroughs in his marriage. He was rededicating himself to his core commitments in life. He was going to mass every week.

All of Peter's language was about taking responsibility for his past life. He made excuses for others, not for himself.

PETER'S PAST

Peter is an extremely intelligent and capable human being, personable and easy to talk to. But the traumas of Peter's childhood lurked in the background. He revealed the low self-esteem of his youth, his terrible self-image of his body growing up, his loneliness even inside a large family. Peter was the youngest child. It is also the case, I believe, that his religious training was mediocre.

More of Peter's traumas and sufferings have been revealed to me over time. Peter's willingness to reveal these things helped me understand him. He was better able to help me because he made himself vulnerable and opened up.

It is impossible to understand Peter without considering the torturous legacy of both Nazi and Soviet oppression of his mother and other members of her family in the old country. I have listened both to Peter and to his sister Joan about this subject. There is both explanatory power in this and also a natural appeal to mercy.

I have worked a great deal with Peter on the psychological concept of the "life script." I challenged him to look into his childhood for an early decision he made as to how he would spend his life. And I challenged him to lay that bare, and to let it go, and to live in the present moment. He understood that and followed up on that subject with me again.

Peter's flaws were evident to me too. I will not reveal them. But I will say that since I have known him, I find that Peter is terrible at hiding his flaws. I think he didn't want to hide them anymore. I think he wanted to be rid of them. Jail helped him get rid of them.

I challenged Peter as to certain specific flaws of his. I had to wait till he was receptive. I am grateful to say that he was receptive, and received my suggestions with immediate insight and understanding. He took the challenge. He is so easy to talk to, and he wants to

improve.

But Peter's flaws should also be seen in the context of his earnest goodwill, his reason, insight, faith, and good humor. He is a hard worker who was dealing with unemployment and underemployment when I met him. With his clearance on hold, I witnessed his considerable efforts to find new ways to offer his knowledge and skills to new audiences. He worked hard to provide for his family. Nothing came easy, but he kept working hard.

PETER'S FUTURE

I cannot stand the thought of Peter's children living their childhood without their father.

I myself was an Army brat and my father was gone for long periods of time at critical moments in my childhood. These absences affect people differently, but for me they were very bad and stole my happiness at a young age.

I do not want that to happen to Peter's children. It would only compound the tragic suffering of his mother and other family members in the Soviet Union.

What is striking about Peter is his sincerity, his good will, his warmth and his insight. He will be a force for good wherever he goes. But he belongs with his family.

I can't wait to see what Peter is going to do next. He will finally be freed from the burdens of long ago. Wherever he goes, he will be a blessing, a voice of both reason and encouragement, and a testimony of God's love and care.

I AM A VICTIM OF A SIMILAR OFFENSE

I noticed in the federal sentencing statute 18 USC 3553 that this court should ensure that punishments are similar for similar crimes.

I am a victim of a "similar crime." I consider it to be far more damaging to the United States and its interests. The only person charged was sentenced to time served.

I am a victim of the infamous OPM hack, the intentional data breach inflicted upon the public servants and military service members of this country when millions of our security investigation files were hacked and stolen by a foreign power. In terms of actual harm, scale, scope, breadth, audacity, and recency, this catastrophic breach has incomparably grave strategic national security implications. And implications for individuals: This foreign power now has my personal self-disclosures of a lot of private things as well as my complete address history and work history—and that of 21.5 million of my closest friends.

FBI Director [James Comey](#) stated: "It is a very big deal from a national security perspective and from a counterintelligence perspective. It's a treasure trove of information

about everybody who has worked for, tried to work for, or works for the United States government” (*The Washington Post*. July 9, 2015.)

To my knowledge the U.S. Government has brought exactly one person to justice for this. Foreign hacker Yu Pingan who supplied the malware was arrested.

A federal judge sentenced this hacker to time served—18 months—and he was deported.

I hope you find this comparison useful.

PETER’S SENTENCE

I believe that Peter’s time served is sufficient incarceration to punish him for the actions described in the agreed-upon statement of facts. Probation and community service would allow him to pay any remaining debt while caring for his family.

His eight months of incarceration have achieved multiple effects on Peter. Punishment in our society is meant to reprove and correct, to redress the harm done, to protect society from future harms, and to deter others from acting similarly.

The entire judicial process has reproved and corrected Peter. Near-constant isolation (“because of the virus”) gave Peter time to reconsider all the actions of his past life. He has fully considered both the origins of his actions and his present character. He has a balanced grasp of both his mistakes and flaws and his merits and future contributions.

Peter has come to a much deeper understanding of how the unique circumstances of his family of origin contributed to his actions in his young adulthood. He embraced a process of how he needed to heal from past hurts and change his mindset.

Peter has deepened his spiritual life to an extraordinary degree. He bears no ill will towards anyone else. He accepts the consequences of his actions and is thankful for the changes that his incarceration has worked inside of him. He is grateful to God for his life. Even alongside the great anguish of his present circumstances, he maintains a good attitude. It is inspirational.

Separation from his family has only deepened his love and commitment to them.

The harm that Peter has done has been redressed through all of the following: the painful lifelong stigma of the charge to which he pleaded; his disclosures to the FBI about what happened; his loss of future employment in his field of expertise; his complete physical separation from his family; and since his arrest, his uninterrupted incarceration under harsh Covid protocols.

Furthermore, Peter had already demonstrated a reformed attitude over an extended period

of time. Peter spent the last 10 years trying to undo any harm he may have done earlier in his life.

In fact, it is Peter's release that would enable him to do more good in society and to redress the mistakes of his past. It is most of all as a father that Peter will contribute to society. Our society is increasingly unstable, particularly for children. Now more than ever, children need their father.

Peter represents no future risk to the nation. I do not agree with any characterization of Peter that paints him as someone with any loyalty to Russia, nor that Peter would ever disclose anything confidential to a foreign government in the future.

Here are my observations about Peter's loyalties. He is loyal to a loving God and Father who cares for him. Peter is loyal to his family, and grateful to God for them, and sorry for what he has put them through. Peter is loyal to the land of his birth to which his mother fled to escape persecution and hardship in the Soviet Union. His life and his family's life are here.

Peter has a lot of support to help him. Peter has community resources available to him for encouragement and accountability. He has access to faith-based friendships and accountability partnerships and groups. He had already committed himself to this kind of accountability before his arrest.

Peter is also very resourceful in reading and studying to improve himself. He dedicates himself to understanding of the origins of his actions so as to improve and do better in the future. During the time I have known him I often saw daily improvement, daily transformation in his mindset and attitude towards himself and others. He abandoned the negative thought patterns that came from the challenges of his past and he put others first.

Peter has a loving and supportive family—both his own family and his family of origin. He has a lot of powerful reasons to motivate himself to the highest possible conduct.

Most of all, as a faithful practicing Catholic, Peter has the comfort of God and the strength of the sacraments to continue to refine him and purify him in the service of others. His faith has only deepened both before and after this judicial process began. It is his connection to God that will guide him on the right path, even if that path is very difficult. He knows very well that God is with him.

All of these factors will support Peter in living a reformed life and doing the right thing in whatever situation arises.

Peter has been punished for what he did.

Peter has suffered greatly in jail since his arrest.

Covid jail is not normal jail, it is much worse. In addition to all the customary humiliations of incarceration—

- Peter has been allowed no visitors whatsoever since his arrest. I attempted to visit Peter at the jail and was told through an intercom that no one is allowed in the jail.
- Peter's wife and four children have never been allowed to visit him. There are short video calls. This is not the same.
- Peter is a Catholic who has the need to receive spiritual care and the sacraments including confession and Holy Communion. In the jail he has had no access to in-person spiritual care and access to the sacraments. Precisely at the time of greatest need for these things, he has not had access to them.
- Peter has suffered greatly from the inability to have truly private personal conversation with anyone outside the jail. All his phone calls (except with attorneys) are made on a monitored line for which he has paid considerable amounts.
- Peter has suffered greatly from the complete lack of human touch in jail. One time on the phone I played for him a song about God's love, and he broke down in tears.

Life in prison would be even more unaccountable under Covid protocols that in actual practice make little scientific sense but according to testimony at the Marshall Project, provide daily opportunities for capricious denial of prisoners' basic needs, such as showers and phone calls.

I refer you also to the illuminative Clinesmith case. He was an attorney with a central role at the FBI itself whose criminal missteps provided the pretext for the FBI to spy on the incoming president's campaign.

According to news reports, Clinesmith in August 2020 pleaded guilty to "one count of making a false statement within both the jurisdiction of the executive branch and judicial branch of the U.S. government, an offense that carries a maximum term of imprisonment of five years and a fine of up to \$250,000."

"[He] lost his job, and his government service is what has given his life much of its meaning," Judge Boasberg said at the sentencing. "He was also earning \$150,000 a year and who knows where the earnings go now. He may be disbarred or suspended from the practice of law, you may never be able to work in the national security field again. **These are substantial penalties.** (*Emphasis added*)

"What is more, he went from being an obscure career government lawyer to standing in

the eye of a media hurricane. He has been threatened, vilified and abused on a nationwide scale."

The judge sentenced Clinesmith to 12 months' probation. Clinesmith's attorneys had also noted that he had a pregnant wife.

Judge Boasberg's standards could be applied to Peter's case as well: the loss of income, alienation from his career field, and intense stigma of the offense. Peter's Wikipedia page has little true information but fits in the "Son of Russia" stigmatizing label.

The suffering of Peter's family at home has been a part of his own punishment

Peter's solicitous love and care for his family compound the punishment of his incarceration. I have watched him with his children and they are a loving family. Prior to his arrest I took walks with Peter. He often brought his tiny child with him. She is a happy and rambunctious child who needs her father's stabilizing presence.

I have visited Peter's family at his home about a half-dozen times since his arrest. I have personally witnessed the situation of the children. They are well taken care of and share a lot of love amongst themselves. They are all handling this situation heroically but they need their father back. I have also seen with my own eyes the strain that Peter's absence and incarceration have put on each member of the family.

This strain is even greater because of Covid lockdowns and other protocols. The COVID 19 lockdowns have had a broadly harmful effect on the youth and teens of this nation. Peter's children need their father at home. I hope the Court will weigh this factor with great seriousness.

Peter's wife is the stable and genial center of the home. She is extremely practical and ensures that her children have everything they need. It is plainly evident how loyal she is to him and she loves him very much. She is a simple woman, she has a simple and direct approach to work and family life. As upsetting as these circumstances would be to anyone, I have never seen her lose her mild manners.

We are talking about four children here, three of whom are minors. When they suffer, Peter suffers.

Deterrence

I believe that Peter's punishment to date is sufficient to deter others. In any case, few people have his painful family history with the Russian system.

Any further incarceration, I submit, actually rewards the adversaries of our country. They must certainly be pleased to see an American officer humiliated, his life and career legacy destroyed, his Russian-born wife left alone, cast out by his brothers-at-arms, thrown in

prison by his own system. That is a win for them too—the longer the better. Rather, a soldier who has paid his debt, reforms his mind and his life, and returns to American society as a faithful son, that is much better for American interests.

Another deterrent effect must be considered, that is the deterrence effect of this proceeding on good American citizens from answering the call to work for their government, either in military or civilian roles. Notwithstanding the agreed statement of facts, this proceeding sheds little light into exactly what happened or why. That is confusing and off-putting to many who might place themselves under the power of this system.

In light of all these observations, I advocate a just sentence of time served with probation and community service.

In any case, please provide in your order for Peter to have confidential spiritual care in person and access to his family.

Thank you for your attention to what I wrote here. I hope it helps you to render a just and merciful judgment in this case.

Most Truly Yours,

David J. DePerro